NATO - Time To Retire The Colors?

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"The World has changed dramatically... As an agent of change, a source of stability, and the indispensable guarantor of its members' security, our Alliance will continue to play a key role in building a new, lasting order of peace in Europe: a Europe of cooperation and prosperity."

Rome NATO Summit Declaration,
8 November 1991

For the heads of state and government representing the 16 member nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the Rome Summit of 7-8 November 1991 presented the Euro-Atlantic Alliance a chance to respond to the key question: Has NATO lost its raison d'etre? Crafting a response was no small undertaking in light of the collapse of the Soviet threat and the accompanying political changes sweeping Europe, which have significantly altered the security environment in Europe. Nevertheless, the NATO leaders sought to provide a positive answer. They had promised at an earlier summit, held in London in 1990, to develop a new strategy adapting NATO to the new Europe, for presentation in Rome.

Not surprisingly, the Alliance leadership unveiled a plan in Rome which outlined a rationale for a continued role for NATO. The plan, called "New Strategic Concept" (NSC), dictated that "Prudence requires us to maintain an overall strategic balance and to remain ready to meet any potential risks to our security which may arise from instability or tensions." Acknowledging that the threat of a full-scale attack on NATO's European fronts had disappeared, the NSC contended nevertheless that an environment of uncertainty and unpredictability existed. This meant therefore that the Alliance "...retained its enduring value." According to the document, the allies would, however, respond to the new, more favorable security circumstances in Europe. The Alliance promised to reduce its military forces and to restructure them along smaller, more flexible, mobile lines. They would be more multinational in nature as well. Further, NATO reaffirmed its commitment to be less reliant on nuclear weapons. The NSC will be looked at in greater detail later on; the point here is that the Alliance aimed at making the case that NATO remained relevant, amidst a doubtful European audience.

That was November 1991. In the days and weeks after, through the first quarter of 1992, the political and security landscape in Europe experienced more dramatic change. The USSR ceased to exist on 1 January 1992. In its place, a shakey

Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), made up of the states of the Russian Federation, Ukraine, and Belarus, is seeking agreement on cooperation in the areas of foreign, economic and military policy. Armenia and the five Central Asian republics are weighing an invitation to join. The Baltic states of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have stated that they want nothing to do with CIS. Georgia, facing considerable domestic upheaval, has not addressed the question of CIS membership.

CIS does not appear to have much of a future. In discussions among CIS members, particularly between Russia and Ukraine, serious differences have surfaced over the scope and pace of free-market economic reforms and the outlines of a common defense force. As the two large republics engage in increasingly acrimonious debate on these and other issues of sovereignty, the prospects for a cooperative commonwealth relationship become darker and less favorable. On defense, the two republics are moving away from the notion of a common defense force and toward the establishment of separate national armed forces.

The implications of the Soviet break-up for NATO's security have to be seen in the context of the new environment in Europe. In the emerging post-Cold War era, as noted in the New Strategic Concept, there does not appear to be any threat of military aggression by the forces of the former Soviet Union.

The Warsaw Pact has ceased to exist. Another positive development concerns the disposition and the command and control of the former USSR's 27,000 nuclear weapons. The CIS members have pledged to match President Bush's September 1991 decision to remove and destroy all U.S. ground and naval-launched tactical nuclear weapons from Europe. The CIS has also agreed to place all strategic nuclear systems under Russian command and control. In brief, there is a significant absence of a CIS threat to NATO. The Cold War is over; the balance of power rests favorably with the West.

So, why NATO? The November 1991 New Strategic Concept, drafted before the demise of the Soviet Union, would appear itself to be on the verge of extinction. It would seem to make sense for the Alliance to give way to a new all-European security system and for American forces and leadership to be withdrawn. In the new European security environment, what American interests are served by NATO? Why should the United States, confronted with serious domestic needs, continue to commit substantial resources for the defense of a Europe which is on the road to peace?

The task at hand is to advance one perspective for looking at the problem. In seeking answers to the questions, this paper aims at engaging the reader in an assessment of assumptions, interests, objectives and, ultimately, a realistic

strategy for the Euro-Atlantic community. This paper will argue that it is not possible to draw up a long-term strategy, for the necessary essential elements of information, needed to craft it, do not now exist. What is possible is an interim solution. Here the paper will contend that, at a time of continued strain and adjustment, NATO can provide a stabilizing influence at least over the short-term. The paper proposes that the Alliance be granted a lease on life out to the year 2000, using the New Strategic Concept as its mandate. By fixing a set term for NATO, the Alliance eliminates the uncertainty surrounding the prospects for NATO's immediate future; shelves the debate on whither NATO for eight years, buying time for the Alliance to assess new risks and the appropriate security structure needed to meet them. Working in tandem with other European institutions, such as the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), NATO would support the creation of a new European security order. A decision to keep NATO until the end of the century would allow proponents of a European security identity to develop the concept and to test it. On reaching the year 2000, NATO members would come together in a review conference to assess all options. NATO would either be extended again or replaced by another security and defense arrangement.

With this as an introduction, the discussion turns to the issues facing Alliance policy-makers.

The Case for a New European Security Arrangement

To be sure, with the end of the Soviet Union and of the Cold War, there appear to be fair and legitimate grounds for reassessing NATO. Hugh de Santis' thoughtful article on "The Graying of NATO" challenges the grounds for the Alliance's continued legitimacy. While not calling for NATO to be disbanded post-haste, Mr. de Santis urges the allies to plan for its dissolution. NATO, he concedes, fulfills a short-term utility, such as providing a check against possible German neutralism or military resurgence. It also gives the allies U.S. assurances and support during an ongoing period of unrest. But, he argues, NATO cannot make it over the longer run, because the conditions that gave rise to the Alliance 42 years ago will probably not extend into the emerging post-war Europe. The Western European Union (WEU), the only European institution whose members have pledged to defend one another, looms as the leading candidate to succeed NATO.

The WEU does represent a viable alternative to NATO. Having served as an understudy to the Alliance, it is uniquely suited to take over its functions. The most recent interest in grooming the WEU to replace NATO springs in part from the thinking of some Europeans, the French among them, that the American commitment to Europe's security is fading and that Europeans need to create their own "security identity" and

assume responsibility for their own security. As envisioned, the WEU would be merged with the European Community to create a decision-making apparatus that can develop and implement European security and defense policy. Over time, it would acquire the military capability needed to execute that policy. The Franco-German defense cooperation would form the nucleus for an eventual all-European defense force.

A second all-European alternative would be a structure offering membership to the 48-nation CSCE. The thought here is that the time may have come to do away with regional and even sub-regional alignments that have produced a divided Europe. Thus, not even a European pillar, in or outside of NATO, would be desirable, as it would create new divisions among the European states. NATO should be eliminated in favor of a new European-led cooperative security relationship among as many of the CSCE states as possible.

An American View

The idea that Europe should assume full responsibility for its own defense finds an echo of support in the United States. Many Americans see the end of the Cold War as an inviting opportunity for America to end its costly defense commitment to Europe. For these Americans, Europeans have had pretty much of a free ride on security for 42 years at American expense. Congressman Aspin noted in a recent study that over half the

U.S. Cold War defense budget was spent on defending Europe against the Warsaw Pact. With the American security umbrella providing cover, Europeans have rebuilt their economies and have freed up resources to provide their citizenry social benefits that are denied to American workers, such as national health care and free university education.

Americans are incensed that efforts since the mid-80's to engage the allies on equitable burdensharing have produced long reports and considerable rhetoric, but no basic agreement. Instead, the allies have presented America with complicated formulas for tallying the "true" contributions by the Europeans. The Federal Republic of Germany, for example, has argued at length that its provision of rent-free facilities to allied stationed forces in Germany and the use of Berlin occupation funds to finance tasks associated with allied administration of the city should be factored into the overall burdensharing equation. In the end, progress toward ensuring a more equitable distribution of the financial burden has not been notable.

Americans also tend to see Europeans as uncompromising on trade. The Euro-Atlantic Alliance has not been able to achieve tariff reductions under the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), largely because the Europeans have repeatedly refused American demands to reduce agricultural subsidies. At

the annual Munich Conference on Security Policy, held in early February 1992, leading American politicians warned that unless the Europeans moved on the trade issue, American support for NATO and American participation in the Alliance could be undermined. Republican Senators Richard Lugar and William Cohen in particular told the Europeans that trends toward isolationism and protectionism are very strong in America. Another Republican Senator added that while Europeans had heard threats of American withdrawal for 40 years, this time it was different. Times had changed. Supporting this view are prominent Democrats in the Congress who, rejecting the internationalist tradition of Woodrow Wilson and Franklin D. Roosevelt, argue that America should come home if the trade talks fail.

By and large, proponents of American disengagement assert that U.S. interests are no longer served by NATO. There is no longer a security threat to America, they contend. They point to the problems at home: a severe recession, 7.3 percent unemployment, 36 million Americans unable to afford health care, a weakened education system, rampant crime and a road and highway network which is badly in need of repair. Compounding this is a huge federal funding deficit and a trade imbalance. Resources, they say, ought to be spent correcting the problem at home, not on confronting a non-existent threat in Europe.

Europeans Respond

Europeans have not taken kindly to American criticism. At

the Munich conference, a Dutch official rejected the American linkage of American commitment to NATO and trade concessions, labelling it as a bluff and saying that friends do not talk to friends that way. Europeans themselves complain about American "arrogance" on trade and point to U.S. threats to withdraw from NATO as evidence that America increasingly is becoming an unreliable ally. This has prompted France in particular to call on the Europeans to take the lead in developing their own security and defense policy.

What Are the Assumptions?

Growing differences between Europeans and Americans on issues such as burdensharing and trade could over time provoke a rupture in the Euro-Atlantic community. But can Europe and America afford to allow this to happen? Is the basic set of assumptions which has governed their security relationship for over 40 years no longer valid? If not, what new assumptions have they drawn up about the future security environment in Europe? In sum, is there any need for a transatlantic security link?

This paper argues that NATO has not developed, and perhaps cannot develop, long-term assumptions on future threats or rationales to justify its case for immortality. It can, however, make credible judgements about security over a short, fixed timeframe. For the immediate future, for example, it is

clear that while the Alliance's containment policy has been vindicated, its full success has not been achieved. The end of the Cold War has not ushered in an era of peace, stability and prosperity in Europe. The international community is witnessing several troubling signs. First, the disorderly break-up of the Soviet Union has produced a rise in aggressive nationalism, ethnic clashes and irredentism. The bloodbath produced by the growing war between Armenia and Azerbaijan is the most telling result, rivalled only by the destruction and carnage of the Yugoslavia example. Thus, the immediate and long-term future could well yield a return to instability and war in Europe, as age-old hatreds emerge from the ashes of the Cold War. Should this transpire, there would be no assurance that these conflicts would remain localized; they could well spill over onto NATO territory. This possibility alone would seem to argue for preservation of the Euro-Atlantic security link, at least through the chaotic and violent period ahead.

Secondly, there are well-founded concerns over the potential for mass diffusion of Soviet military equipment, nuclear weapons and related technical expertise to the third world. Uncontrolled deliveries of military hardware and weapons technology would lead to the creation of new regional powers and new challenges to the West.

Thirdly, the bold initiatives of Boris Yeltsin and other leaders of the new republics to institute western-style

economic reforms are in serious jeopardy. If they do not get the massive economic assistance needed to give the reforms a chance to take hold, the republics of the former Soviet Union may well slide backward toward totalitarianism and extremist nationalism. This in turn could produce war among themselves, lead to a new arms race, and bring back a confrontation with the Euro-Atlantic community.

Thus, in shaping a new security relationship, member states of NATO are faced with long-term uncertainty and unpredictability. In drawing up new assumptions, they can at best craft shorter-term views about the challenges and threats to their security. At a minimum, these would seem to include:

- A fluid and likely volatile global situation, with several potential new regional powers;

- Proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and related military technologies;

- Continued economic and political upheavals throughout the former Soviet Union.

Given the interim assumptions that can be made about Europe's future security environment, it would seem prudent for the Alliance to remain intact for now and to re-double efforts to keep its internal differences on trade and the like in

check. It may well be that the security and defense policy which the allies have followed since the early 1950's will remain relevant in the 1990's. This assumes of course that a case can be made that the interests and objectives remain valid.

Interests, Objectives, And Threats

Barely a year after the Persian Gulf war, the world has shown that it continues to be a dangerous and volatile place. The assumptions discussed above point to continued instability and unrest, at least over the next few years. Against the backdrop of an uncertain future, the Alliance's interests clearly are:

- Survival of the Euro-Atlantic community, including a Europe "whole and free";

- Healthy and growing economies, based on free markets and equitable trade practices;

- A stable and secure world, free of major threats;

- Dissemination of democratic values and practices and safeguarding of human rights, including equal treatment of minorities.

The major tasks or objectives for the Alliance in the new geo-strategic environment flow from these common interests. Essentially, these include:

- To guarantee the security and territorial integrity of the member states;

- To help free market forces stimulate economic growth;

- To deter and defend against threats of aggression against the territory of any Alliance member;

- To promote democracy and human freedom through an active pursuit of dialogue and cooperation.

The threats facing the Alliance in the 1990's are different in composition and are not, for the most part, readily apparent. In his article, "Defense Planning for the Mystery Tour", Dr. Colin Gray argues that the 1990's will prove to be a decade of "nonlinear change" in which "uncertainty-pull" will provide the basis for contemporary defense planning. This paper agrees with Dr. Gray and would add that for the foreseeable future, threats will be blurred, often several and geographically dispersed, and therefore difficult to assess and deal with. There are a couple aspects of this uncertain and unpredictable threat of the '90's.

Politically, the dangers of any protracted anarchy and chaos and the specter of other Yugoslavia-like scenarios are clear. As noted earlier, one cannot rule out the possibility that extremist political forces, both former communists and rightist nationalists, will exploit the current confusion and frustration and destabilize the new democracies.

Militarily, any spill-over of regional armed conflicts would put NATO's security interests at risk. Further, the threats of proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and related technology, disruption of the flow of vital resources, terrorism, sabotage, and new mini-arms races - all have a potentially destabilizing effect.

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee in early February 1992, JCS Chairman General Colin Powell said it best. In a very real sense, he said, the primary threat to security is being unprepared to handle a crisis or war that no one expected or predicted. In response to congressional calls that the United States reduce sharply its military presence overseas, the Chairman replied: "I categorically reject this idea of no-threat, no-sweat, cut the forces. It's a simplistic idea. It is historically wrong." Implicit in General Powell's response to the Congress is the reminder that eternal vigilance is the price for freedom. In defining the threats of the 1990's, members of the Alliance would do well to remember this as well.

A Gameplan Out To Year 2000

In this post-Cold War environment of troublesome assumptions, relatively clear interests and unpredictable threats, the task of developing long-range security planning is no small undertaking. This paper argues that in the present environment, no long-term security planning for Europe is possible. At best, what can be done is to develop a series of short-term plans to deal with contingencies over short, fixed periods of time. Working with a shorter timeframe is managable in the sense that the variables are mostly known and is more efficient in terms of resource use.

The time element is important. Without knowing the shape of threats which lie beyond the scope of the present decade, it becomes difficult to insist that NATO remain the essential forum for security and defense policy. It would be ill-advised for the Alliance to persist in its view that NATO, even with its changes accommodating new realities, must remain as the indefinite linchpin of the transatlantic security relationship. Such a view comes off as Cold War-ish and seems out of place in a new era of dialogue and cooperation. It is precisely this point that NATO critics in the U.S. Congress and in Europe are zeroing in on. A continued long-term commitment to NATO is not defensible in the current political and budgetary climate and risks continued feuding on the

relationship between the Alliance and the Western European Union. Instead of quelling debate on whither NATO, the long-term look makes it a topic for daily discussion. In the meantime, resources and time are being diverted from critical Alliance planning tasks as NATO seeks to justify its existence on a daily basis.

If NATO ought not to be presented as a long-term solution, can it be "sold" as an interim one? This paper argues that the interim solution, with a renewable lease, is in fact the most viable basis for retaining NATO.

What this paper proposes is simple: That the 16 NATO members suspend the debate and planning on alternative security arrangements and instead commit to NATO as their essential security and defense mechanism out to the year 2000. Instead of feuding politically about the future of the Alliance, wasting time and resources, the NATO partners would shelve plans and ideas for new European architectures and concentrate on implementing the tasks outlined in the New Strategic Concept over the remaining eight years of this century. Work on the WEU concept would be excluded from this restriction, as the link to NATO has already been blessed by the member states. On reaching the year 2000 and having crossed its 50th anniversary, NATO would call a CSCE-type review conference, allowing its members to debate and decide its future course.

It makes sense to shift to a periodic review process akin to the Helsinki CSCE model, as it permits the Alliance to plan and to make needed changes as warranted by a changing geo-strategic environment. Thus, it has the advantage of affording NATO members frequent and timely opportunities to make mid-course corrections relating to strategy, and to roles and responsibilities of the partners. The periodic review would afford the Alliance a chance to assess progress on the WEU on a more regular basis, thereby strengthening an assessment on its longer-term potential.

Postponing a definitive decision on NATO until the year 2000 is realistic and do-able. It would reflect a realization that, given the ongoing changing and unstable period, it is very prudent to stick with the security afforded by the Alliance insurance policy. As a practical matter, it would not be possible to abolish NATO now, as no comparable security and defense mechanism exists which could assume its functions. It may be possible, on the other hand, to make such a decision in the year 2000 if certain events occur by then: the former Soviet troops leave German soil, the political and economic reforms in East-Central Europe and Central Asia take hold, nationalist and ethnic clashes are under control, and an unprecedented period of stability and prosperity is forecast for Europe.

Politically, it would be smart to place NATO under periodic review. Such a decision would balance the need for prudence with the equally important need for Alliance change in the face of sweeping democratic changes and an evaporated Soviet threat. It would tacitly recognize the fact that no security relationship lasts forever; that at best it can be periodically renewed, so long as the circumstances warrant.

Further, by committing to a process of periodic review and renewable terms, NATO proponents would step out of the Cold War shadows and assume an enlightened posture which could disarm their opponents. They could portray their decision as a purchase of a term life insurance policy for the next eight years, with the option of renewing it after the year 2000. NATO critics can make the case that a long-term commitment is politically untenable, but would have a hard time denying that the Alliance fulfills a vital role for the immediate foreseeable future. In effect, the wind would be taken out of their sails, as the basis for their case to end or replace NATO would have been removed. The pro-NATO forces, freed of the distracting, acrimonious debate, would have bought time - time to plot a future scheme to keep the NATO colors flying.

The proposal advanced by this paper for a short-term decision does not purport to be a zero-sum game for WEU proponents. Planning and development of the European identity

concept by non-NATO allies would proceed. Ideally, WEU would move its institutions, including its secretariat, to Brussels to facilitate coordination with NATO. This would be pursuant to the EC summit decision, made at Maastricht in December 1991, that the WEU would serve as the vehicle for increased European responsibility on defense matters. The NATO review conference in the year 2000 would provide an excellent opportunity to gauge progress on the WEU and to assess its potential for replacing NATO as Europe's venue for formulation and implementation of policies bearing on European security and defense.

In the meantime, NATO would have a full agenda out to the year 2000.

New Strategic Concept - NATO's Eight-Year Contract

Approved at the Rome NATO summit on 7-8 November 1991, the New Strategic Concept (NSC) provides the needed guidance for the Alliance to function in the changed geo-strategic security environment. No time limit is assigned to the new mandate. Under this paper's proposal, the NSC would be valid only until the end of the century. A review of its main features follows.

The NSC embodies a broad approach to security based on three reinforcing elements: dialogue, cooperation, and the maintenance of a collective defense capability. The new

strategy is flexible, able to achieve NATO objectives in peacetime, crises, and war. In seeking to define future security risks, the NSC makes the case that the Alliance will likely confront threats that are "multi-faceted in nature" and less predictable. They could emerge from current spate of regional upheavals and conflict and could, if allowed to grow, spill over onto NATO territory.

NATO's fundamental security tasks remain essentially unchanged:

- To provide an "indispensable" foundation for a stable security environment in Europe;
- To serve as a transatlantic forum for allied consultations;
- To deter and defend against any threat of aggression against any NATO state; and
- To preserve the (now favorable) strategic balance within Europe.

The new strategy advances an active pursuit of dialogue and cooperation as a means to reduce risks of conflict, to build understanding and confidence, and to help manage crises

affecting allied security. Central to these initiatives will be an enhanced liaison program with the countries of Central and Eastern Europe and of the former Soviet Union.

The NSC's defense guidelines stipulate that the Alliance's force will move away from linear forward deployments to a more flexible defense of all NATO territory, employing a reduced forward presence. The strategy of flexible response will be modified to reflect a reduced reliance on nuclear weapons. The overall size and in many cases the readiness of conventional forces will be reduced. Those retained will be more flexible, more mobile and multinational in composition. Greater reliance will be placed on mobilization and reserves.

In sum, the NSC lays out a credible strategic agenda which can adequately deal with the "uncertainty pull" of the next eight years.

Link To Other European Institutions

This paper argues that in the new political and strategic environment in Europe out to the year 2000, NATO will need to work alongside other European institutions - such as the European Community (EC), WEU and the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE). The task of fulfilling the ambitious agenda of the New Strategic Concept cannot fall to one institution alone. There is plenty of work for all. In

the final analysis, only within the context of interdependent institutions, binding together the fortunes of Europe and North America, can a new European security architecture emerge.

In engaging the other European institutions in security cooperation, NATO can be assured that such cooperation does not place its survival in jeopardy. The Alliance alone has the mechanism, the membership and capabilities to perform the core security tasks outlined in the NSC.

Finis

As the specter of uncertainty and unpredictability descends on the Euro-Atlantic community, it becomes clear that a long-range vision on security is impossible to establish. Regional disorder and strife, ethnic clashes, resurgent nationalism, and a potential proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, all make the task of predicting the future synonomous with that of winning the lottery. This in turn complicates decision-making regarding NATO's long-term viability and relevance. To impose a new security and defense arrangement that is not tested nor has teeth, in the midst of chaos, with imprecise data and a blurry security picture, courts disaster.

If the long look is not possible, what can be done is to fix a series of shorter, measurable visions. The first

constitutes the core proposal of this paper: make NATO the essential forum for allied security cooperation out to the year 2000. At the end of this period, NATO would be subjected to a CSCE-type review conference to determine if its mandate should be extended. WEU would continue to be developed as a concept and would re-locate to Brussels to facilitate planning and coordination with NATO. At the end-of-century review conference, WEU progress and potential would be assessed. A decision would be made at this time: either renew NATO's term for another short period or terminate its mandate and accelerate the transition to a new European security order.

A decision to keep NATO to the year 2000 would remove the cloud of job uncertainty hanging over the Alliance in the immediate critical period ahead. Its job secure for the next eight years, the Atlantic security partnership could safely devote its energies to the fundamental tasks outlined in the New Strategic Concept. The decision would diffuse arguments which assert that since no long-term commitment to the Alliance is justifiable, it should be disbanded post-haste. It would buy time both to assess threats likely to emerge in the new century and to weigh their implications for NATO and other European security alternatives.

The proposed interim solution provides an institutional basis for an American role in European security affairs. As such, it would ensure continued U.S. influence and leadership,

which is known and accepted by the allies. It is a fact that European NATO members are more comfortable with an American lead than a European one - on which there is no consensus.

In terms of American domestic politics, an agreement to keep NATO until the year 2000 would provide an eight-year shield against American neo-isolationists and NATO critics who seek an accelerated withdrawal of U.S. forces stationed in Europe and an end to American funding for NATO. With the Congress having agreed to the notion that NATO may not be the long-term answer but is the short-term necessity, congressional debate on the nature of U.S. commitment and funding would be significantly reduced.

Prudence dictates that NATO be kept as the Alliance's security framework in the near term. Doing so provides the Euro-Atlantic community a renewable term life insurance policy at a time of ongoing and uncertain change. Rather than seeking to replace the existing, effective security mechanism, the community would do well to continue its investment in NATO, at least until the end of the century. The intervening time ought to be a period of sober reflection and quiet talk on the dynamic of change and what it means for the prospects of peace and prosperity for Europe and North America and, indeed, the world. The end result may not necessarily be an accurate picture of tomorrow, but it may be a blueprint for making solid decisions about the future.

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